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ABSTRACT

In this survey, teachers in 46 elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay area were asked to describe how they worked with reading specialists, if at all. Of 414 teachers reporting, 49.3% reported that the reading specialist instructs selected students, usually outside the classroom, and provides no other services to the teacher. Only 20% of the teachers reported receiving one service (diagnostic feedback, suggestions, or materials) on a weekly basis, in addition to instruction for students; only 10% reported receiving two or more such services weekly, in addition to instruction for students. It was also found that there is a marked association between the degree of teacher/specialist cooperation and the following instructional practices: use of detailed formal planning and record keeping for individual students and use of complex information in making instructional decisions for daily student reading activities. The data suggest that the instructional program might be strengthened by the promotion of a more cooperative relationship between the reading specialist and the classroom teacher. (GW)

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TEACHERS AND READING SPECIALISTS: COOPERATION OR ISOLATION?

Elizabeth G. Cohen, Jo-Ann K. Intili, and Susan Hurevitz Robbins

Frequently teachers are unaware of the services reading specialists offer in their school or district. Other teachers, although aware of such services, often report that the reading specialist is of little use to them except for working with individual children who have particular reading or learning problems. "After all," the typical comment goes, "specialists only work with one or two students at a time. They can't understand the problems of trying to teach 30 students--or even 16--at a time." Teachers are reluctant to work with a specialist who they fear may evaluate them unfairly because of a lack of understanding of the problems involved in teaching in a classroom setting.

At a time when the effective teaching of reading is considered critical and when methods of teaching reading are becoming increasingly complex and hard to manage, a reading specialist can be a valuable resource, not just for a few children, but for the whole school. Our recent survey of reading teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area shows rapidly increasing use of individualized instruction with diverse classroom materials; in such classrooms the teacher must fill a variety of roles--information dispenser, resource, hypothesis tester, evaluator, and manager. Teachers could obviously use some assistance if schools want to continue to use this increasingly sophisticated mode of instruction. The reading specialist can help by working closely with teachers, assisting them in filling these complex roles.

As sociologists who study teaching and the organization of schools, we can present evidence to support this argument. In our survey, we asked teachers in 46 elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay Area to describe how they worked with reading specialists, if at all. In addition, we asked several questions about the methods of instruction these teachers employed in teaching reading. Their responses enabled us to study the following questions:

1. How are reading specialists used?
2. How, if at all, do reading specialists cooperate with teachers?
3. When teachers and specialists work closely together, what are the consequences for the teachers' methods of teaching reading?

How Are Reading Specialists Used?

As part of a larger survey undertaken by the Environment for Teaching Program of the Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, 469 teachers in 46 elementary schools were sampled at random. Within each school, half the teachers sampled completed one version of the questionnaire and the other half completed another, more detailed questionnaire. For some of the questions about reading specialists we can report on the total sample of teachers; on other questions we are restricted to reporting on the half of the sample that answered the more detailed questionnaire.

The teachers in the sample worked in schools ranging from inner-city to suburban and somewhat rural schools. Many of the teachers were members of teacher teams; many had aides. Of the teachers sampled, 69%

worked in traditional closed classroom buildings. The rest taught in open space schools or in partially closed classrooms.

We asked both teachers and principals about the number of specialists available for reading, but there was little agreement between principal and teachers on their answers for a given school. Teachers typically reported more reading specialists in their schools than did principals. Apparently the teachers classified a wider range of school personnel as "reading specialists" than did the principals. For instance, some classroom teachers defined resource teachers as reading specialists. Some reading specialists are based in the district office and travel to various schools in the district. Others are based in the school, where they may work full time or part time. The focus of analysis in this paper is on the interaction between the teacher and the personnel whom teachers define as "reading specialists."

Instruction by the Specialist. It is clear from our sample that many teachers had access to a specialist for the purpose of teaching reading to selected students. Table 1 shows that almost three-quarters of the sampled teachers reported having a specialist to instruct their students. Twenty-eight percent reported such instruction on a daily basis and approximately 30% reported such instruction several times a week.

Suggestions by the Specialist. How often do specialists work closely with the teacher rather than only with selected students? Unless specialists discuss what they are doing and ask for cooperation from the teacher, it is unlikely that the teacher's reading instruction will be affected by

TABLE 1

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Instruction by Specialists
(414 teachers reporting)

Frequency of Instruction	Percentage Reporting
Never or Almost Never	27%
Less Than Once a Month	1
One or Two Times a Month	2
Once a Week	12
Several Times a Week	30
Daily	28

the specialist. There are many ways in which the specialist can influence teachers' instructional process. For example, the specialist could make suggestions to the teacher about what to do with the child receiving special instruction when he or she is back in the classroom. Accordingly, we asked teachers: "How often does the specialist give you suggestions?" Their answers revealed that specialists did not typically have this kind of a working relationship with the teacher. Of those teachers who reported any use of specialists, only 13% reported that the specialist offered suggestions more than once or twice a month. Fifty-one percent reported occasional suggestions and 36% reported none. It is quite significant that when we looked at the different patterns of teacher-specialist relationships, we could not find any reports of specialists who gave suggestions but did not instruct. Much more common was a pattern where specialists instructed selected students and gave infrequent suggestions to the teacher.

Diagnostic Feedback from the Specialist. Diagnostic feedback from a specialist can be considered an even more direct way for teacher and specialist to work together. For a description of this working relationship between specialists and teachers we must turn to the half of the sample that filled out the more detailed questionnaire. We asked these 209 teachers: "How often do you receive diagnostic feedback from the specialist?" About half of those teachers who had access to a specialist (56%) said they received diagnostic feedback once a month at the most. Only 31% said they received diagnostic feedback about particular students once a week or more.

Provision of Materials by the Specialist. Another way that teachers and specialists can work together is for the specialist to provide the teacher with special reading materials for students who have special needs or interests. We asked half of the teachers: "How often does the specialist provide materials for your use?" We found that half the teachers reported that specialists never or almost never provided such materials; 31% reported that specialists provided materials monthly; and only 19% reported that they received materials weekly.

In the preceding paragraphs we have been discussing the frequency with which reading specialists provided various services to teachers in the sample. When we examine how a given teacher answered all the questions about working with specialists, we can draw a general picture of that particular working relationship. We can ask, is the working relationship one in which the teacher and specialist work in almost total isolation from each other? Or is it one in which the specialist interacts with the teacher so that the teacher reinforces the work of the

specialist with particular students and gains some benefit for his or her total reading program?

The most common pattern we found was that of a specialist instructing selected students and providing no other service (reported by 49.3% of all the teachers who filled out the detailed questionnaire). If the specialist does not give the teacher suggestions or provide diagnostic feedback or materials, many channels of communication and cooperation are being missed. Many of the teachers whose students received instruction from the specialist had few opportunities to see, be seen by, or talk with the specialist because the specialist typically pulled the student or students out of the classroom. Of the 71 teachers who received instructional help for certain students (but no other services), 55 (or 77%) said the specialists taught outside the classroom. This means that a very significant portion of teachers worked in isolation from the specialist.

Furthermore, of all teachers with access to a specialist, only 20% reported receiving diagnostic feedback, suggestions, or materials (that is, one service in addition to instruction) at least once a week. A mere 10% reported receiving two or more such services this frequently.

In summary, the typical relationship between specialist and teacher was one where the specialist instructed selected students (mostly outside the classroom) and provided no other services to the teacher. The next most common relationship was for the teacher to receive instruction and one service from the specialist. Receiving instruction and two or more services was quite rare. This overall pattern of teacher-specialist relations seems to restrict the opportunity for professional interaction between specialist and teacher on the problems of reading instruction.

Predicting the Consequences of Cooperation

Although we found that cooperation was not very common between specialist and teacher, we had enough teachers in the sample who received services from specialists to examine the association between a teacher's method of instruction and the degree to which the teacher worked with a specialist. In the detailed version of the questionnaire we asked specific questions about teachers' methods of record keeping, planning, and instructional decision making in the teaching of reading. Many of these questions were related to the more advanced methods of reading instruction based on diagnosis and prescription according to skills.

To test the consequences of working with a specialist with respect to the teacher's behavior, we first divided the teachers into four categories depending on their relationship to a specialist: a "no access" group, a group receiving instruction for selected students only, a group receiving instruction and one service, and finally a group receiving instruction and two or more services. This classification scheme reflects an increasing closeness of the working relationship, running from no relationship to some working relationship, through close cooperation.

Table 2 presents the proportion of teachers in each of these categories who reported making use of a variety of techniques of record keeping and planning for reading instruction. We predicted that the reading instruction of teachers who cooperated with specialists would reflect the benefits of that working relationship. By looking down each column one can easily see that the provision of services to the teacher is closely associated with the extent of the teacher's use of these techniques. In

TABLE 2

Percentage of Teachers Making Extensive* Use of Specific Record Keeping and Planning Techniques, According to Degree of Cooperation with the Specialist

Degree of Teacher-Specialist Cooperation	Skill Notes	Sequential Learning Charts	Criterion Referenced Tests	Skill Plans	Number of Teachers
No Access	41%	14%	30%	38%	30
Instruction Only	39	25	31	39	71
Instruction + One Service	59	28	41	54	29
Instruction + Two Services	64	43	50	57	14

*"To a considerable extent" or "A great deal."

Note: "Skill notes," "sequential learning charts," and "skill plans" refer to mechanisms teachers use to keep track of individual students' mastery of reading techniques. "Criterion referenced tests" refer to tests that assess students' mastery of a particular reading skill. Any of a number of tests developed either commercially or by the teacher privately can qualify as criterion referenced tests. For the teacher to respond to our items, skill notes, sequential learning charts, skill plans, and criterion referenced tests must actually be used as aids in the teaching of reading in the classroom.

other words, teachers who received two or more services were the most likely to make extensive use of these techniques. Teachers who received instruction for selected students and one service were intermediate in their use of these techniques between the instruction only and instruction-plus-two-services groups. When teachers received instruction only, their use of the techniques did not differ much from that of teachers who had no access to a specialist. Although we cannot prove that cooperation produces changes in teaching, we can examine their association in the survey results, as we have done above.

As a further indicator of complex reading instruction, we looked next at the percentage of teachers who used various kinds of information in making instructional decisions concerning reading. Table 3 presents these percentages according to the degree of teacher-specialist cooperation. We see in Table 3 that teachers who received instruction of selected students plus two or more services clearly used a more complex information base for making instructional decisions. Specifically, of those teachers who cooperated most closely with the specialist, 64% focused instruction on students' stated interests; half of them used activities they had seen work well in other teachers' classes; and 43% used ideas from workshops and from other professionals. As we move from instruction of selected students only to one service and then to two services, the percentage of teachers using complex information steadily increases. Teachers in the "No Access" category were similar to the "Instruction Only" category except in their use of activities from other teachers' classes; teachers without access to a specialist were much less likely to use such information.

In review, there is a marked association between the degree of teacher-specialist cooperation and the following instructional practices: use of detailed formal planning and record keeping for individual students and use of complex information in making instructional decisions for daily student reading activities.

Implications of These Findings

A large percentage of teachers in the survey (70%) reported that a reading specialist instructed selected students in their classes. However,

TABLE 3

Percentage of Teachers Making Frequent* Use of Various Sources of Information in Deciding on Daily Activities for Students in Reading, According to Degree of Cooperation with the Specialist

Degree of Teacher-Specialist Other Cooperation	Student Interests	Activities Teacher Has Seen Work Well in Other Classes	Ideas from Workshops & Professionals	Number of Teachers
No Access	48%	11%	28%	30
Instruction Only	43	31	31	71
Instruction + One Service	52	45	41	29
Instruction + Two or More Services	64	50	43	14

*"Most of the time" or "Always."

less than half of these teachers reported ever receiving suggestions from the specialist. In other words, the addition of a specialist to a school staff typically means that selected children are taken out of the classroom on what is often called a "pull-out" basis. It is not typical for the specialist to give suggestions to the teacher or to provide diagnostic feedback or to provide materials. The frequency of this pattern may be due to specially designated funds that pay for the specialist and that can be legitimately applied only to selected disadvantaged youth. However, one could certainly argue that to best help students the specialist should suggest to the teacher some follow-up classroom activities for these children. Any suggestions made for selected children may well affect the teacher's program for all children.

Considering that specialists are an expensive and therefore relatively scarce resource, why not use them in a way that suggests maximum impact? One could ask how effective pull-out is when the classroom reading program may not support the specialists' efforts and may well tend to counteract those efforts. Our data show that when the specialist worked closely with the teacher, the teacher tended to use more sophisticated individualization techniques for the whole class. Our observed associations cannot prove that the cooperative relationship with the specialist is the cause of more sophisticated instruction, but the consistency of the relationship on many indices suggests that this may be the case. Our data suggest not only that there might be benefits for those children requiring remediation, but that the entire instructional program might be strengthened by promoting a more cooperative relationship between specialist and teacher.

Even if a classroom teacher doesn't have specialized training in the latest methods of reading instruction, with good use of the specialist as a staff resource (and some assistance from aides or volunteers), he or she may well be able to manage a complex record keeping, planning, and decision-making system.

How can a member of the school staff, particularly a specialist, achieve this kind of cooperative relationship with a teacher? We think that the principal holds the key to coordinating the two roles. If the principal sees the gains from cooperation, he or she can make it clear to all parties that working together is legitimate and expected behavior. The principal can clarify roles, for instance, by reassuring teachers that specialists do not have formal evaluation rights over them. If the spe-

cialist is hesitant about consulting the teacher or vice versa, outside resources such as teachers and specialists who have successfully managed cooperation could be brought into the school for in-service training. Then the issues of time and place for specialist-teacher conferences can be brought up as a critical step in the process of strengthening the school reading program. With these data as evidence, it may not be so difficult to persuade the principal to make the very best use of the specialist as a resource; closer cooperation between specialist and teacher is a highly desirable goal.